

Etheridge Knight. 1931 – 1991

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/like a salmon quitting the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birth stream/I hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard/I smelled the old land and the woods/I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother and split/my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost contented/I had almost caught up with me. (The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them, they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no children to float in the space between.

The Prison Cell – *Mahmoud Darwish. 1941-2008*

It is possible...
It is possible at least sometimes...
It is possible especially now
To ride a horse
Inside a prison cell
And run away...

It is possible for prison walls
To disappear,
For the cell to become a distant land
Without frontiers:

What did you do with the walls?
I gave them back to the rocks.
And what did you do with the ceiling?
I turned it into a saddle.
And your chain?
I turned it into a pencil.

The prison guard got angry.
He put an end to my dialogue.
He said he didn't care for poetry,
And bolted the door of my cell.

He came back to see me
In the morning,
He shouted at me:

Where did all this water come from?
I brought it from the Nile.
And the trees?

From the orchards of Damascus.
And the music?
From my heartbeat.

The prison guard got mad;
He put an end to my dialogue.
He said he didn't like my poetry,
And bolted the door of my cell.

But he returned in the evening:

Where did this moon come from?
From the nights of Baghdad.
And the wine?
From the vineyards of Algiers.
And this freedom?
From the chain you tied me with last night.

The prison guard grew so sad...
He begged me to give him back
His freedom.

Here We Will Stay – *Tawfiq Zayyad. 1929-1994. Written in solitary.*

Here We Will Stay
In Lidda, in Ramla, in the Galilee,
we shall remain
like a wall upon your chest,
and in your throat
like a shard of glass,
a cactus thron,
and in your eyes
a sandstorm.
We shall remain
a wall upon your chest,
clean dishes in your restaurants,
serve drinks in your bars,
sweep the floors of your kitchens
to snatch a bite for our children
from your blue fangs.
Here we shall stay,
sing our songs,
take to the angry streets,
fill prisons with dignity.
In Lidda, in Ramla, in the galilee,
we shall remain,
guard the shade of the fig
and olive trees,
ferment rebellion in our children
as yeast in the dough.

Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying – Noor Hindi

Colonizers write about flowers.
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks
seconds before becoming daisies.
I want to be like those poets who care about the moon.
Palestinians don't see the moon from jail cells and prisons.
It's so beautiful, the moon.
They're so beautiful, the flowers.
I pick flowers for my dead father when I'm sad.
He watches Al Jazeera all day.
I wish Jessica would stop texting me Happy Ramadan.
I know I'm American because when I walk into a room something dies.
Metaphors about death are for poets who think ghosts care about sound.
When I die, I promise to haunt you forever.
One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them.

Bobby Sands – ‘WEEPING WINDS’

Oh! Cold March winds your cruel laments
Are hard on prisoners’ hearts,
For you bring my mother’s pleading cries
From whom I have to part.
I hear her weeping lonely sobs
Her sorrows sweep me by,
And in the dark of prison cell
A tear has warmed my eye.

Oh! Whistling winds why do you weep
When roaming free you are,
Oh! Is it that your poor heart’s broke
And scattered off afar?
Or is it that you bear the cries
Of people born unfree,
Who like your way have no control
Or sovereign destiny?

Oh! Lonely winds that walk the night
To haunt the sinner’s soul
Pray pity me a wretched lad
Who never will grow old.
Pray pity those who lie in pain
The bondsman and the slave,
And whisper sweet the breath of God
Upon my humble grave.

Oh! Cold March winds that pierce the dark
You cry in aged tones
For souls of folk you’ve brought to God
But still you bear the moans.
Oh! Weeping wind this lonely night
My mother’s heart is sore,
Oh! Lord of all breathe freedom’s breath
That she may weep no more.

PRISON LIFE – anonymous. Poetry of Women Prisoners (ed. Sue Stauffacher)

It’s waiting on letters
When you’re doing time.
And your family won’t write,
or send you a dime.
It’s waiting on visits
that never take place,
from friends or loved ones,
who forgot your face
It’s hearing them lie
And saying that we’re trying,
making you promises
but you know they are lying
It’s making plans with someone
Who you thought you knew,
but their plans suddenly change,
and it didn’t include you
It’s hearing them say how much they care,
but in your time of need
they are never there.
It’s hearing them promise
and it goes straight to your head,
But when push comes to shove,
They leave you for dead.
It’s feelings and Love
Honor and Pride.
Pain and Emotions and hurting inside
It’s expressing yourself to your loved ones,
and friends,
But they can’t feel your pain because you’re in the pen
It’s calling and hearing
“ ‘A’ Block’s on the phone.”
But you maintain
Because life goes on
It’s really messed up when you’re doing time
But that’s “Prison Life.”
Out of sight, out of mind.

a small selection of poems by prisoners and against prisons for soup ink.

monday 20th june 2024

there are no separate worlds.

“Across borders, languages, contexts, and identities, both catastrophes and victories of spirit and defiance reverberate around the globe.

One environment is not untouched by another. The personal is not separate from the political.

The positive project is not separate from that of destruction. Prison is not separate from the “free world.”

Means are not separate from ends.

Bridging these divides is a shared curiosity and commitment; bridging these divides is solidarity. This is not to flatten or oversimplify diversity and differences in circumstance, intensity, and consequence. Rather, that these different pieces are held together like organs of the body held by connective tissue.

So we consider: how do we strengthen this connective tissue? How do we remain strong, yet supple and flexible? Bridges, connection, must also be built through time, especially in a world that moves too fast, from one crisis to the next.

June 11th aspires to be one of these bridges: to build solidarity across borders, between movements, and among generations. Remembering and supporting long-term prisoners, as well as carrying on shared struggles, are two ways to strengthen this connective tissue. A stronger connective tissue will, in turn, bolster us against further repression”

– June 11 Call 2024

Prison is – Marius Mason, 2014

Hushed and heavy
Like water near the Ocean’s floor,
Then loud and bitter,
Like fractious storms lashing the sky
Everything cement and nerves
And too many years gone by...
The heart requires a place to rest
From all its maddened wanderings
The raft of the Medusa tossed
And trembling in the sea.
Or just this table here
And you across from me,
A sunlit sail
And I this aching castaway.
I cannot touch you—it is not allowed.
Our eyes hold
Hanging onto words
Until a hand falls upon the back
The narrow hall, the clanking keys
The door, the cell
And under.